

TWENTY-ONE G.I.'S WHO CHOSE TYRANNY

Why They Left Us for Communism

HAROLD LAVINE

THERE were twenty-one who stayed behind, twenty-one GI's, captives of the Reds, who chose to remain with the Reds rather than come home. They were only a handful compared with the 3,746 who did return; and no doubt many Americans have already washed their minds of them, saying "Good riddance." Others, however, cannot forget them so readily. In the American doxology, this is "God's country" and the best way of life is "the American way of life." What made the twenty-one desert Mom's apple pie and the right to heckle the umpire, for Communist slavery? What made them prefer the regimentation and poverty of the Communist state to the blessings of General Motors and democracy?

The questions rankle, for they cannot easily be answered. All the facile answers, the answers that fit into the stereotypes—both those of the liberals and those of Colonel McCormick—are demonstrably false. The liberals would not have been surprised had most of the twenty-one been Negroes, for, if the liberal stereotypes are true, Negro PW's should have proved more susceptible than whites to Communist propaganda; moreover, the Communist propagandists concentrated on them, at the same time giving them better food and better living condi-

tions generally. But only three are Negroes. Colonel McCormick would have found comfort if most of the twenty-one had come from the slums of the Eastern Seaboard, for that, he insists, is where "subversive European ideologies" flourish. Not one comes from such an environment: nearly all are from small-city, small-town, or rural America, the "real America." And both the liberals and McCormick would have drawn predictable, if differing, morals, had most of the twenty-one been Jewish, or immigrants, or the children of immigrants. None is a Jew; one comes from abroad; one has parents born abroad; all the others (except, of course, the Negroes) are of Irish or "native, white American stock" going back for generations.

Nearly all the twenty-one were captured very early in the war. They had spent about three years in prison when the cease-fire finally was declared. Since they had, therefore, been subjected to a great deal more Communist propaganda over many more months than most of the other PW's, could the reason they chose tyranny be that new, horrendous word, "brainwashing"? Even if the answer were yes, it wouldn't mean much. For scores of the PW's who never hesitated a moment when offered the opportunity to return home were far more deeply indoctrinated with Communism than any of the twenty-one. The army believes that at least 200 who returned are "Progs," just like the twenty-one, and that a few may even be Communists. One of the worst "Progs" in the prison camps, in fact, was Corporal Claude Batchelor, who had at first decided to stay with the Communists and then changed his mind at the urging of his Japanese wife, the army says. He now faces a court-martial.

After the Defense Department released

WHEN the truce came to Korea, twenty-one American prisoners of war chose to remain with the Communists. HAROLD LAVINE here tells the stories of these men and tries to discover what common factors of personality and fate led them to give up their American citizenship in order to lose themselves in the world of totalitarianism. Mr. Lavine is politics editor of *Newsweek*. Readers will recall his earlier articles in our pages: "Can Eisenhower Form a Government?" (July 1953) and "Why the Democrats Are Confident" (January 1954).

the names, home towns, and next of kin of the twenty-one, the rumors and the speculation started: they were homosexuals, drunks, dope-addicts; they had committed such terrible crimes in civilian life that they were afraid to come home; they had committed equally terrible crimes in the PW camps. Some commentators blamed the American educational system for their decision: the twenty-one were the inevitable product of a school system rotten with left-wing ideology, these commentators said. Others were certain that if the twenty-one had been subjected to religious training, they never would have succumbed to Communist propaganda; Christianity would have insulated them against Communism.

THERE is some supporting evidence for the rumors—but not much. There is absolutely no evidence that any of the twenty-one was a homosexual before his capture; but the Indians who guarded the prison compounds do say that at least three, and possibly more, appear to have become overt homosexuals in captivity. One did have a record of juvenile delinquency in civilian life, but he never had been considered a criminal. Several were listed as “Rats” by other PW’s, but scores of the PW’s who rejected Communism had far worse records in the prison camps. Only one of the twenty-one seems to have come across any left-wing propaganda in civilian life. And the vast majority not only had had religious teaching, they were practicing Protestants and Catholics; a few had seemed exceptionally devout to all who knew them; and one remained devout even after embracing Communism.

Were the twenty-one just sports, each completely different from the other? Or did they have some characteristics in common? Is there an identifiable type of American who not only can be captured by Communist propaganda but who can be persuaded to renounce his country and himself?

To repeat, the questions aren’t easy to answer; the facile answers do not fit the facts, and what is more, we still don’t know all the facts and probably never will. How-

ever, we now do have some interesting clues.

Perhaps the most striking statistical fact about the twenty-one is that eighteen of them were Regular Army men. The overwhelming majority of those who fought in Korea were Selective Service soldiers and Reservists. Yet the overwhelming majority of the men who stayed behind were men who looked on the army as a career. Most were fairly young when they joined up—seventeen or eighteen; several enlisted at sixteen, when they were legally under age. Their average age when they rejected democracy for Communism was twenty-three.

Nearly all came from families that by American standards were poor. Fourteen came from broken homes; their parents were dead, divorced, or separated. Two had attended college; ten had attended high school, but only three of these had graduated.

Three were married. None was engaged.

These are the bare statistics and in some ways they are revealing enough. The fact that eighteen of the twenty-one were Regular Army, for example, cannot be without significance; nor can the fact that fourteen of the twenty-one came from broken homes. However, we have other clues. In the months since the twenty-one renounced home and country, we have learned something about their lives.

MOST of what we know about Sergeant Andrew Fortuna, twenty-seven, of Detroit, we learned from his half-brother Donald, twenty-two, a four-time loser, now in jail for “assault with intent to rob while armed.” Don obviously loves and admires Andy; he considers Andy’s fate far worse than his own. “When I heard about Andy wanting to stay over there, it was just like a wall had fallen on me,” says Don.

“Andy and I had a rough life; from my very first memory, we had a hard way to go, but he’s the guy who overcame it. He was a normal kid, well-liked, a hard worker and capable. He tried to hold our family together. He was more mature than most kids, and he was a good soldier. He isn’t like me at all.”

Andy is illegitimate. His mother was a Kentucky farm girl who brought him to Detroit in 1929; there she married an Italian auto worker. His stepfather gave Andy his name. Mrs. Fortuna subsequently had two children by her husband, Don and a daughter, Viola.

The 30's were tough years in Detroit. The elder Fortuna frequently was unemployed. Mrs. Fortuna became an alcoholic, who "wandered away for weeks or months at a time." The last time Don saw her she was sitting in a Michigan Avenue skid-row saloon. "When she was home Mom never was mean to us," Don says. "She never beat us or anything." The elder Fortuna finally got sick and tired of his wife and divorced her.

Don adds: "Andy was about four years older than me. He used to make Viola and me sandwiches and take care of us until Dad came home from work."

Andy received good grades in school, Don recalls, "and he was very popular. If I got run out by a bunch of kids, Andy would take care of it. He wasn't a tough kid, but he could take care of himself. We never had much money, and Andy would figure out ways of getting the things we wanted, such as a new pair of pants or a cap gun. We'd collect pop bottles and do odd jobs."

Andy quit school in the eighth grade and got a job as a grocery clerk. Later, he went to work with a construction crew. In 1943 he joined the army. He fought in the European campaign, re-enlisted after V-E Day, and was discharged in 1947. He went to work operating a bulldozer, making between \$80 and \$85 a week. He shared his money with his stepfather and every week he took Viola shopping and bought her "a dress or something."

In 1948, he rejoined the army and went to Japan, where he married a Japanese girl. They had a child, who died of polio.

While overseas, Andy wrote Don that he was thinking of quitting the army when he finished his new hitch; he wanted to start a small contracting business. Early in the war he wrote: "We're going to push the Communists back where they belong." The

first indication Don had that his attitudes had changed was in March 1953, when he wrote from a PW camp: "There are American people who don't understand what the Korean war is all about." Don is baffled. Andy was such a swell guy, and a good Catholic too.

Andy's story isn't typical. No one's story is ever quite like anyone else's. And yet, there are elements in Andy's story that we find, say, in Corporal Aaron Phillip Wilson's.

AARON WILSON is twenty-one. He comes from the sawmill town of Urania, deep in the piney woods of north-central Louisiana. Urania is little more than a large clearing in the forest, a rude, unprepossessing settlement of tin-roofed shacks.

The Wilsons are devout members of the Pine Hill Baptist Church. The walls of their home are covered with religious symbols, and Aaron's mother, Mrs. Henry Wilson, still proudly recalls that he never missed a Sunday at church. "He liked to dress up in his Sunday best and go to prayer meeting," she says wistfully.

Mrs. Wilson also says that Aaron was a "tender-hearted, humble boy, who never did give nobody no trouble." Aaron's boyhood chums and neighbors say he was a docile, easily led youngster "who would take a lot of lip without getting his dander up."

Says his sister Myrtle, who is passionately devoted to him: "Bud [her nickname for Aaron] was a big hand to play. He liked nothing better than to beat on the old git-tar, and he listened to phonograph records right smart. Bud never had a care in the world. He never was troublesome or got out of hand. He was always one to tag along with the crowd. I guess you might say he was a born follower."

The Wilsons were indulgent parents. Mrs. Wilson, who refers to Aaron as "Sonny," declares: "We never punished him. Fact is, we never laid a hand on him since he was twelve." And Henry Wilson, a simple, direct man of fifty, with a gaunt face and thinning hair, neatly combed, adds: "I wanted him to have it easy. Sometimes he washed

and polished cars on Saturdays so he could have some pin money. That's about all the work he did. I never objected to his piddlin' around, hoping he would get an education and then amount to something. I only went to the Fifth Reader myself, and I knowed what a powerful drawback that can be."

Aaron wasn't much of a student, however. He advanced in school so slowly that pretty soon Myrtle, though two years younger, was in the same class. Myrtle became his protector. "I always took up for him because he'd never take up for himself," she says. "Once, when the teacher scolded him for reading the blackboard too slow, I jumped out of my seat and told off the teacher. She sent me home for it, but she never fussed at him again."

Myrtle says that Aaron had only a lukewarm interest in girls. "He'd break a lot of dates on any old pretense. He'd never go steady with a girl for more than a few weeks; he'd lose interest."

Aaron quit school in the eighth grade to join the army. He was then just seventeen. He was reported killed in action in Korea in January 1951, but two months later the Wilsons received a letter from him in a Chinese PW camp. His first few letters obviously were written with a Chinese propagandist sitting beside him. In his later letters he spoke with affection of the Communists.

Henry Wilson says: "If I thought my boy didn't come back account of anything I'd done, I'd take a gun and blow my brains out."

LET'S take a look now at the story of Private First Class Otho Bell. Otho is twenty-three. He comes from Hillsboro, Mississippi. His mother died in giving birth to him, and Otho has always thought of himself as a murderer. He believes he killed his mother. She was twenty-three when she died, and shortly before he went overseas Otho told his wife that he, too, would die at twenty-three.

Seven months after Otho was born, his father remarried. There are now six other children in the Bell family.

The Bells had a hard life. During the 30's

they were sharecroppers. Later they became tenant farmers. They now own their own farm and in the past three years they have been making a little money. However, Otho doesn't know about that. He was already a prisoner of the Reds when the Bells had their first good year.

Otho's father and stepmother are church-going people, but Otho never attended church. He just wasn't interested, and his father didn't believe in forcing him to attend.

Otho was an indifferent student. He wasn't stupid, his teachers say, but he just couldn't learn from books. His teachers liked him. "Nobody could ever get mad at Otho," says his father.

There's one thing his father and stepmother always emphasize when they're discussing Otho: he was easily led. "He was never a leader, but he was a very good follower. If you told him to do something he'd do it."

Otho was in the eighth grade when he quit school to join the army. He was in for three months when he decided that he didn't like it. His father got him discharged as under age.

When he was eighteen he joined up again. While he was stationed at Ft. Lewis, Washington, he married Jewell Olson, the daughter of a farmer and logger. They have a child, a girl, whom Otho has never seen. He was fighting in Korea when she was born.

Jewell remembers this about Otho: she could never make him strike her. One night she made an all-out attempt to provoke him. She taunted him. She said things she doesn't want to repeat. Otho shook. He shook and cried and cried. Then he toppled over. Jewell remembers that.

Jewell says that while Otho was in Korea he wrote her that he was attending chapel regularly, and that he wanted to attend church when he returned. He never wrote about combat, she says; he didn't want to worry her. He never discussed Communism.

"He didn't know what Communism is. If you'd have asked him what he was doing in

Korea, he wouldn't have known what to say."

Jewell thinks Otho became a Communist because he likes everybody. Though born a Mississippi sharecropper, she points out, he never had any prejudice against Negroes.

Otho's father thinks he went Communist because the Reds promised him "better food and easier living." Also, he repeats, Otho was "easily influenced."

EACH of the twenty-one is quite different from the others. And yet, with only two notable exceptions—Corporal John Roedel Dunn, twenty-five, of Baltimore, and Corporal Larence V. Sullivan, twenty-three, of Omaha, a Negro—they all seem to fit into a pattern.

Private First Class Arlie Pate is twenty-two. He was born in the small coal-mining town of Weaver, Illinois. He comes from a long line of Baptist ministers, although his father isn't one.

His father, Howard Pate, has been an epileptic since Arlie was an infant. The family was on relief before Arlie started grade school. Howard Pate still draws a disabled father's pension from the state and Mrs. Pate gets dependent children's aid for the five youngsters still at home.

Mrs. Pate says that Arlie seemed well liked by most of his classmates but that some of the older boys picked on him because "his clothes were ragged and patched." He never defended himself when they did, because "I always told them [the children] not to kick up any fuss around the house and I guess they never did fight unless they were just pushed into it." In high school Arlie made good grades when he wanted to. However, he wasn't happy in high school, according to his sister Beulah, because "someone always seemed to have it in for him." His attendance became less and less frequent. One day someone broke into his locker and stole a pair of pants and \$2. At that, he quit school.

He was sixteen then. He got a job driving a truck in East St. Louis. According to Beulah, he usually came straight home from work and stayed home, "reading or working with some hobby, like building shelves." He

didn't care much for girls or for sports, though he did follow the baseball results in the papers.

One of Arlie's fondest memories was a trip he made at fourteen to visit his grandmother and his uncle in Carbondale, Illinois. He enjoyed walking through the rugged, hilly Ozark country and hunting rabbits and squirrels. He liked it because he could walk for hours without meeting a human being. Mrs. Pate says: "He was always begging for us to get a farm down there."

"He was always a good boy and never caused nobody no trouble," Mrs. Pate declares. "He was helpful around the house. He never had much to say but was an attentive listener, especially when his uncles were telling war stories. He never raised his voice when he was angry or upset. He just walked out of the house without a word and took a long walk."

Arlie enlisted in the army at seventeen. Six months later he was in Korea. . . .

CORPORAL JOHN DUNN's father, William, says: "I'm bewildered." And he might well be. It's quite possible to understand why someone like Arlie Pate should prefer Communism to democracy. The same isn't true of Dunn.

The Dunns are the kind of family advertising men dream about. William Dunn is personnel manager for the American Smelting and Refining Company. Mrs. Dunn is office manager of the Quality Products Company, a wholesale grocery firm for which her son John worked, too, before he was drafted. A daughter, Barbara, who is pretty, blue-eyed, blond, and unmarried, lives with them. Their only other child, William Jr., a veteran of the Marine Corps, is unmarried and owns his own home. The Dunns buy a new car every year.

Corporal Dunn was educated in the public schools of Baltimore and at Baltimore City College. He was graduated in the top third of his class in 1948.

Jack, as his family calls him, spent little time in sports. He preferred reading, particularly adventure stories and history. His

major outside activity was the Episcopal Church of the Resurrection. He was assistant superintendent of the church school and he took part in other church work.

"He was one of the finest boys I've ever known," says the Reverend Elmer P. Baker. "Most of his life hovered around the church. I wish I had about twenty more like him."

As a child, according to his father, Jack Dunn was happy and obedient. He displayed a strong sense of responsibility toward his younger brother and sister. "Jack always made me and Bill toe the line," says Barbara.

Although Jack was a tractable child, he also displayed strong qualities of leadership, his father declares. He wasn't easily influenced by his associates; he couldn't be pushed around.

"I don't know what happened to him, but I don't believe he's staying with the Communists of his own accord."

Dunn's story is notable precisely because it's so different from those of all the others except Larence Sullivan, who also comes from a stable middle-class family. The rest of the nineteen have so much in common that it's possible to build up a composite portrait of the kind of PW who stayed behind.

His parents are divorced or separated, or else his father is dead. His home, by American standards, was a poor one. He wasn't much of a student in school and hasn't much education. He was "a good boy." He was quiet, tractable, he did what he was told, he conformed.

He was a follower, not a leader. When he got into trouble it was usually because someone with a stronger personality had led him into it. He was like Corporal Lowell D. Skinner, twenty-two, of Akron, Ohio, whose mother says: "He was quiet and old for his years. He always went along with what the others wanted to do. He never caused me worry. I used to lean on him for help with the younger children, because he was so sensible and seemed so grown up."

He didn't particularly like sports. He preferred reading, listening to music, playing an instrument, hiking, hunting, and fishing.

(One of the twenty-one went in for spear-fishing.)

His favorite amusements, in other words, were those he could pursue by himself. For he didn't particularly like to mix with other boys. Not that he was shy or anti-social. He just never felt part of a group.

He didn't care much about girls. He dated one every now and then, but only because everyone else was doing it.

He came into the army a child—and a child more ignorant than most. After two or three years in the army and three years in prison camps, home, which had been an unpleasant place at best, became a dim and distant one as well. There was no wife to return to, no child, no girl, and, for him, not really much of a life. He couldn't argue with the Communists; they had all the answers, and he, none at all. Neither school nor society had given him any.

All the twenty-one don't fit exactly into this pattern; Dunn and Sullivan hardly fit at all. Yet nineteen of the twenty-one fit fairly closely. It's no accident that eighteen of the twenty-one were Regular Army and that most of them joined the moment they could, and some even when they were only sixteen. Nor was it only poverty that had driven them into the army. There were many more important things lacking in their lives than money—security, companionship, the feeling of being part of something, a purpose in life. In the GI phrase, they joined the army "to find a home." Most of them did "find a home in the army." Faced with the prospect of going back to the life they had known in the States, they chose Communism, which seemed to offer them the kind of home not unlike the army.

Perhaps we can draw no larger moral from the cases of these twenty-one youths than the familiar one that there are people for whom tyranny meets needs that freedom does not. Some of us will consider it cause for self-congratulation that the number was so few, others will find in these boys a reminder that our society needs to be vigilant lest too many adolescents and young people feel themselves homeless.